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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM  
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD  
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL  
PARIS ALSO FOR POL  
ROME FOR MFO  
E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: IS\_KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT  
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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Mideast

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Key stories in the media:  
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Yediot reported that President Bush told Jewish leaders in the White House on Monday that "Arik Sharon" made a brilliant decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip -- a particularly difficult decision from one of the founders of the settlements there -- and that this was the right way for Israel at this time.

Leading media reported that PM Sharon ordered the IDF to act forcefully against the threat of tunnels in the Gaza Strip. Yediot and other media quoted Sharon as saying Monday that if Palestinian terror attacks continue, Israel will not coordinate with the Palestinians in evacuating the Gaza Strip and the northernmost part of the West Bank. Israel Radio reported that last night an IDF force entered Khan Yunis, where it demolished buildings that reportedly were mostly used in attacks against Israel. The radio also reported that retired Maj. Gen. Amos Gilad will supposedly travel to Egypt to meet with top Egyptian intelligence official Omar Suleiman, in order to coordinate the positioning of Egyptian forces along the Philadelphi route. Jerusalem Post reported that warning of immediate danger, Deputy Internal Security Minister Jacob Edery called on the GOI Monday to immediately begin constructing a security fence along the border with Egypt.

Yediot reported that Trade, Industry and Employment Ehud Olmert will meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Cairo today. Olmert is expected to convey a message from Sharon regarding Israel's demand that Egypt prevent terrorist attacks from Gaza and arms smuggling into the Strip. Jerusalem Post and Yediot reported that Olmert will sign a free trade agreement with Egyptian Foreign Trade and Industry Minister Rashid Mohamed Rashid and USTR Robert Zoellick involving the creation of Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZ).

Ha'aretz reported that the focal point of British PM Tony Blair's visit to Israel and the PA next week will be his initiative to convene a conference in support of the Palestinians following the scheduled January 9 elections in the PA. Yediot quoted sources close to Sharon as saying that Sharon will not agree to British initiatives regarding such a conference because this is an attempt to jump over the stages decided upon in the road map. Yediot reported that former U.S. president Jimmy Carter will head a delegation of U.S. election monitors, and adds that the Foreign Ministry has learned that former U.S. president Bill Clinton has requested to join the delegation. Jerusalem Post and Yediot quoted Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz as saying Monday at the Herzliya Conference that Israel would pull its troops out of Palestinians cities before the January 9 elections for the Palestinian chairmanship -- for a period of 72 hours.

Ha'aretz quoted a high-ranking GOI source as saying Monday that Sharon wants the cabinet to approve the changes to the route of the security fence as a "single package," and that he is delaying approval of the already amended and completed plan for the Hebron Hills area until the completion of the plan to reroute the fence in the settlement bloc of Gush Etzion.

Leading media reported that the Labor Party's representatives stormed out of coalition talks last night, citing its insistence on social measures and on the new coalition's parties committing themselves to supporting the disengagement plan. The media also reported that coalition talks hit a snag Monday, after the party's spiritual leader, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, informed party chairman Eli Yishai that he sees no reason to rescind his ruling against the disengagement plan.

All media reported that Hamas activist Mesbah Abu Hweileh survived a bombing Monday that destroyed his car on a Damascus street Monday. The media reported that Hamas and the Syrian government immediately blamed Israel for the explosion. Ha'aretz reported that Israeli officials denied knowledge of the bombing, saying Syria "always blames Israel" for untoward events on its soil. The media reported that three Israeli soldiers were wounded Monday in a Nablus firefight that killed a wanted man from Hamas. Maariv cited a BBC interview with Hamas's political chief Khaled Mashal, in which he said that the U.S. and Europe are holding secret talks with Hamas even though they have declared

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it a terrorist organization.

Leading media reported on an uproar, mostly by Israeli-Arab Knesset members, following Likud MK Yehiel Hazan's speech to the Knesset Monday, in which he referred to Arabs as "worms who live underground and above the ground." He was speaking about Sunday's attack near Rafah.

Leading media reported that France's highest administrative court, the Council of State, moved decisively to ban Hezbollah's Al Manar-TV on Monday, ruling that the channel had repeatedly violated the country's hate laws and ignored its own pledge to avoid making anti-Semitic statements

All media reported that Monday at the Herzliya Conference, IDF Spokesperson Ruth Yaron accused Ilana Dayan, the host of Channel 2-TV's "Uvda" (Fact) program of "cooking" a tape containing an IDF communication recorded during the alleged "confirmed killing" of a 13-year-old Gaza girl by an IDF officer. Maariv cites an interview published two weeks ago by the IDF's official periodical Bamahaneh, in which an army commander describes how, in September, he shot and killed a terrorist who had thrown his weapon and surrendered.

Ha'aretz reported that American citizen Brian Avery, an International Solidarity Movement (ISM) volunteer who was wounded in the face by gunfire in Jenin in April 2003, has petitioned the High Court of Justice to demand that the police, and not the IDF, investigate his case.

Leading media reported that Monday Israel and the EU signed the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) agreement.

Maariv cited research conducted by an organization aiding new immigrants, according to which each immigrant from North America costs the Israeli economy USD 200,000.

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Mideast:  
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Summary:

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Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "Israel will try to reach an agreement that will put government in the Gaza Strip in the hands of an authorized Palestinian body.... But we may be disappointed -- either because Abu Mazen does not want to and/or cannot.... Sharon should continue with disengagement [anyway]."

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "Holding Abbas to a higher standard does not weaken him. It provides the only hope of steering him toward transforming his society into one intent on building its own state rather than destroying Israel."

Geneva Accord co-initiator and Yahad party leader Yossi Beilin wrote in Maariv: "The Labor Party inside the government would 'understand' Sharon if he should decide that the circumstances are not right for [withdrawal from Gaza]."

Block Quotes:

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**I. "From Terror Attack to Disengagement"**

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (December 14): "Upon Arafat's death and with the establishment of Abu Mazen's regime, there will be somebody to talk to about disengagement. Israel will try to reach an agreement that will put government in the Gaza Strip in the hands of an authorized Palestinian body. The U.S. and Egypt are already active to reach such an agreement. But we may be disappointed -- either because Abu Mazen does not want to and/or cannot. Then Sharon will face a minor dilemma, of the kind Barak faced: freeze the situation as is and wait for a phone call from Ramallah; or improve Israel's position and situation by a unilateral move of disengagement, and only afterwards wait and expect some sort of Palestinian willingness to discuss the final peace arrangements. Sharon should continue with disengagement, on the assumption that it is essentially unilateral. That it is without a Palestinian partner. With concern that Palestinian terror will continue, but that the IDF and the settlers will no longer be in the Gaza Strip. Because leaving the Gaza Strip, even unilaterally, is not giving up assets and receiving nothing in return, rather it is removing an extra burden, even if terror continues."

**II. "Ominous Silence"**

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (December 14): "Abbas is the leader of Fatah and its presumed candidate for president. His refusal to condemn this attack [in Gaza Sunday], much less use the thousands of armed men under his control to crack down on supposedly illegal militias, means he is making a choice. If he maintains it, it is a choice of fruitless bloodshed, a path that is likely to produce more Israeli casualties and many more Palestinian ones.... We are being assured, now, that all good things must wait for the Palestinian election, which will strengthen Abbas.... Let Abbas tell his people that the billions in assistance and a chance to build their own state will only come when the Palestinians prove they are abandoning terrorism and embracing democracy. That this must be the path of Palestinian nationalism, not perpetual war with Israel. But Abbas won't say that unless he knows it to be true. And it won't be true so long as Israel and the U.S., not to mention Europe, seem poised to shower him with unconditional support the minute he is anointed in an uncontested election.... In the meantime, holding Abbas to a higher standard does not weaken him. It provides the only hope of steering him toward transforming his society into one intent on building its own state rather than destroying Israel."

**III. "Unity in Order to Prevent Disengagement"**

Geneva Accord co-initiator and Yahad party leader Yossi Beilin wrote in Maariv (December 14): "When, instead of Mofaz and Shalom, a Nobel Prize winner [Shimon Peres] explains [Sharon's] policy, it will be much easier for him to go back to his old habits. He will have no reason to hurry. He knows that in exchange for a few cabinet portfolios he will buy himself a loyal ally who will not threaten his authority. He will also be able to go back to raising extreme proposals, knowing that Labor will veto them, thus quieting its conscience.... The Labor Party, which supports withdrawal from Gaza while it is in the opposition, will allow it to be carried out. On the other hand, the Labor Party inside the government would 'understand' Sharon if he should decide that the circumstances are not right for that, and will also explain to the world that the time is not yet ripe for it. The members of the Labor Central Committee, who will convene in order to approve a coalition agreement, still have an opportunity to prevent the mistake to which its leaders are leading them a second time."